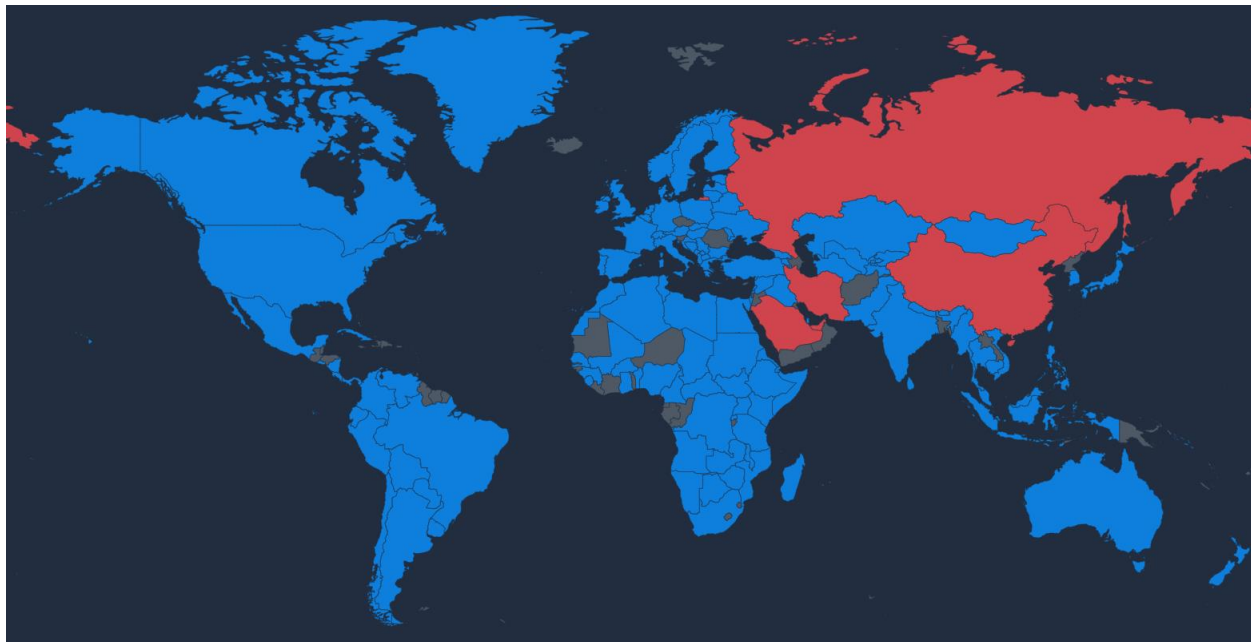


From Covert Tactics to Overt Influence: A Dive into Sharp Power Dynamics

Fatima Binte Zahid¹



Source: Power 3.0

Introduction

Global power dynamics have shifted from traditional covert tactics to a more overt form of influence known as “Sharp Power.” Sharp power is a form of influence used by state and non-state actors to shape the image, preferences, behaviors, and policies of other states through non-military means. It involves employing strategies such as information warfare, disinformation campaigns, economic coercion, and cultural manipulation to undermine democratic processes and weaken the sovereignty of targeted states. It is a strategic approach employed in international affairs that aims

¹ Fatima Binte Zahid is a Research Assistant at the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS). Previously, she was a Teaching Assistant at the Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP). She completed her MSS and BSS (honors) from the Department of International Relations, BUP.

to undermine independent institutions through censorship and manipulation. Sharp power leverages the imbalance between free and unfree systems, enabling authoritarian regimes to suppress free expression, distort political environments in democracies, and insulate their domestic public spaces from external democratic influences.²

This commentary explores the background and context of sharp power, analyzing its impact on international relations and democratic systems. Its purpose is to comprehensively explore the transition from covert tactics to overt influence through sharp power. It aims to shed light on the evolving landscape of global power dynamics, raise awareness about the implications of sharp power, and stimulate informed discussions on potential responses and countermeasures.

The Evolution of Covert Tactics

Covert operations offer a cost-effective approach to pursuing policy objectives on the international stage while minimizing risk.³ Covert operations can bypass diplomatic hurdles, potential public backlash, and international scrutiny by operating discreetly and often under the radar.

Throughout history, states have applied covert tactics to exert influence on other states. Examples of such tactics include espionage, sabotage etc. In ancient times, empires employed spies and assassins to gather intelligence and eliminate political contenders. The Cold War era witnessed a surge in covert operations, with intelligence agencies in the US and USSR engaging in clandestine activities to support proxy wars and manipulate foreign governments.⁴ Covert tactics have evolved with technological advancements, including cyber espionage and disinformation campaigns. These historical examples exhibit the enduring use of covert tactics to achieve geopolitical objectives and shape the course of international relations.

States employ several traditional covert tactics to influence other states. One example is intelligence operations, such as espionage and spying, to gather classified information and gain insights into a target country's political, military, and economic activities. Covert assassinations and sabotage have been employed to eliminate key figures or disrupt critical infrastructure. Covert

² Christopher Walker, "What Is 'Sharp Power'?", *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (July 2018): 9-23. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/what-is-sharp-power/>

³ Simon Anglim, "Covert Operations and Strategy", *Infinity Journal* 2, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 21-25. <https://www.militarystrategymagazine.com/article/covert-operations-and-strategy/>.

⁴ Łukasz Skoneczny & Bogusław Cacko, "Sharp power – introduction to the issue".

funding of insurgencies has been used to destabilize rival nations. Furthermore, propaganda campaigns, disinformation, and psychological warfare have been utilized to shape public opinion and manipulate perceptions domestically and abroad. These examples highlight the diverse range of covert tactics states employ to achieve their strategic objectives.

The emergence of digital technologies has brought about a significant shift in covert tactics employed by states. The internet and advanced communication platforms have enabled new avenues for espionage and cyber operations. Covert actors can now use sophisticated cyber espionage, hacking, and data breaches access sensitive information. The proliferation of social media and online platforms has facilitated the dissemination of disinformation and propaganda on a massive scale, allowing actors to manipulate public opinion and sow discord.⁵ Digital technologies have provided new means for covert communication, coordination, and recruitment, making covert operations more agile and harder to detect. The digital age has thus expanded the scope and complexity of covert tactics, posing new challenges for security and intelligence agencies.

Sharp Power: An Introduction

Sharp power refers to a concept that encompasses the use of coercive and manipulative tactics by state and non-state actors to shape the inclinations, conduct, and policies of other states. Unlike traditional notions of soft power, which rely on attraction and persuasion, sharp power employs tactics such as disinformation campaigns, economic leverage, and cultural manipulation to influence and undermine the sovereignty of targeted states.⁶ It is characterized by its overt and often aggressive nature, blurring the lines between legitimate influence and manipulation. Authoritarian states are using “sharp power” to project their influence internationally.⁷ Their objective is to limit freedom of expression, spread confusion, and distort the political environment within democracies.

Sharp power is characterized by several distinct features. It involves aggressive tactics to shape narratives, perceptions, images and policies of targeted nations.⁸ It often exploits vulnerabilities in

⁵ Skoneczny & Cacko, “Sharp power – introduction to the issue”.

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ Walker, “What Is “Sharp Power”?”.

⁸ Skoneczny & Cacko, “Sharp power – introduction to the issue”.

democratic systems, manipulating public opinion and undermining democratic processes. Moreover, sharp power aims to extend influence beyond national borders, seeking to exert control and project power on a global scale. Ultimately, the objectives of sharp power are to weaken democratic institutions, erode trust in liberal values, and promote the interests and agendas of the wielders of this power. For instance, China's authorities are now interested in influencing international narratives, exert control over messaging channels, and censor any mention of allegations against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).⁹ They are applying a mix of implicit punishments and incentives on key stakeholders and information gatekeepers.

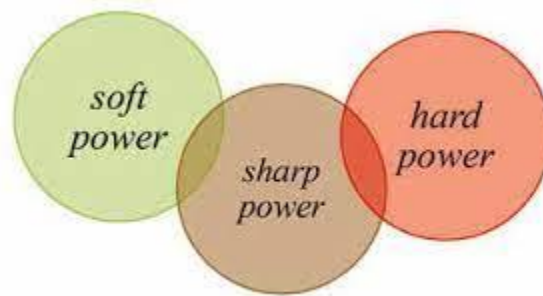


Source: Politicalcartoons.com

Sharp power differs from traditional notions of soft and hard power. Joseph Nye's original definition distinguishes between a country's hard and soft power. Hard power is primarily derived

⁹ Jessica Ludwig, "Sharp Power At Scale: Introducing The Sharp Power Research Portal", Power 3.0, December 1, 2021, <https://www.power3point0.org/2021/12/01/sharp-power-at-scale-introducing-the-sharp-power-research-portal/>.

from coercion and is connected to a nation’s military strength or economic capabilities.¹⁰ On the other hand, soft power stems from attraction, springing from the positive influence of a country’s culture, political values, policies, and a thriving independent civil society.¹¹ The combination of these elements contributes to a country’s ability to wield influence and shape the preferences of others. In contrast, sharp power operates through overt and aggressive tactics, utilizing disinformation campaigns, economic coercion, and cultural manipulation. Unlike soft power, which aims to build alliances and shape preferences through attraction, sharp power seeks to undermine democratic systems and manipulate information to achieve its objectives, blurring the lines between legitimate influence and manipulation.



Source: Łukasz Skoneczny & Bogusław Cacko, “Sharp power – introduction to the issue”

The rise of sharp power as a tool of influence can be attributed to several factors. Technological advancements have provided new platforms and methods for spreading disinformation and manipulating public opinion. Authoritarian regimes have increasingly embraced sharp power tactics to project influence and counter democratic norms.¹² Moreover, the erosion of trust in traditional institutions and the rise of populist movements have created fertile ground for exploiting sharp power strategies. The effectiveness of these tactics in achieving desired outcomes has contributed to their growing prominence in the global arena.

¹⁰ Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, “The Meaning of Sharp Power: How Authoritarian States Project Influence”, *Foreign Affairs*, November 16, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-16/meaning-sharp-power>.

¹¹ Walker and Ludwig, “The Meaning of Sharp Power: How Authoritarian States Project Influence”.

¹² Walker and Ludwig, “The Meaning of Sharp Power: How Authoritarian States Project Influence”.

The Impact of Sharp Power on Global Governance

The implications of sharp power in the international arena are significant and multidimensional. Sharp power threatens democratic systems by manipulating public opinion, suppressing dissent, and eroding trust in democratic institutions.¹³ Tactics like disinformation campaigns and propaganda seek to sway elections, influence policy decisions, and weaken the integrity of democratic processes. Sharp power tactics often involve interference in the domestic affairs of other nations, threatening their national security.¹⁴ The use of economic leverage, cyberattacks, and covert influence seeks to control the decision-making processes of targeted states, limiting their independence and compromising their sovereignty.

Sharp power dynamics might contribute to a destabilization of the international order. By exploiting divisions and amplifying existing fault lines, the actors can foster political polarization, social unrest, and ideological clashes within target countries, leading to increased volatility and tensions at the global level. It might undermine global governance structures by subverting international norms and institutions. Using sharp power can erode trust in international organizations, impede multilateral cooperation, and disrupt efforts to address global challenges collectively. This will weaken the effectiveness of global governance mechanisms and hampers the resolution of critical issues.

Covert tactics used in sharp power dynamics often suppress freedom of expression and restrict access to unbiased information. This stifles dissenting voices, limits media freedom, threatens freedom of expression and undermines the principles of open and transparent societies. The manipulation of information spaces and the spread of disinformation impede the ability of individuals to make informed decisions.

¹³ Ludwig, “Sharp Power At Scale: Introducing The Sharp Power Research Portal”.

¹⁴ O. Leonova, “Sharp Power – the New Technology of Influence in a Global World”, *Memo Journal* 63, no.2 (2019), <https://www.imemo.ru/en/publications/periodical/meimo/archive/2019/2-t-63/security-problems-in-contemporary-world/sharp-power-the-new-technology-of-influence-in-a-global-world>.

Potential Responses

In response to the challenges posed by sharp power, democratic societies and the international community must develop effective strategies and countermeasures. The following potential responses to sharp power can be considered -

1. **Strengthening Democratic Resilience:** Democracies must invest in strengthening their institutions and democratic processes. This should include protecting freedom of expression, ensuring media independence, promoting media literacy, and enhancing cybersecurity measures. By bolstering the resilience of democratic systems, societies can better withstand and respond to attempts at manipulation and disinformation.
2. **Enhancing Digital Literacy and Critical Thinking:** Educating citizens about the risks of disinformation and propaganda is essential. Promoting digital literacy and critical thinking skills can empower individuals to recognize and evaluate misleading information, reducing susceptibility to manipulation. Educational institutions, media organizations, and civil society should collaborate to develop programs that cultivate media literacy.
3. **Promoting Transparency and Accountability:** Governments and institutions should prioritize transparency and accountability in their operations. Openness in decision-making processes, financial transactions, and political campaign financing can help identify and prevent undue influence. Strengthening independent oversight bodies and ensuring the rule of law can help prevent and address abuses of power.
4. **International Cooperation and Norm Development:** The international community should develop norms and guidelines to counter sharp power. This includes establishing rules and standards for online behavior, data privacy, and information sharing. International organizations can play a role in facilitating dialogue and cooperation among nations to address the challenges posed by sharp power.
5. **Support for Civil Society and Independent Media:** Civil society organizations and independent media outlets are critical role in holding governments accountable and promoting democratic values. Providing support and protection to these entities can help

counter attempts to undermine their independence and integrity. Financial support, legal protections, and capacity-building initiatives can strengthen the ability of civil society.

6. **Strengthening Cybersecurity:** Enhancing cybersecurity measures is crucial in protecting democratic systems from cyber threats associated with sharp power. Governments should invest in robust cybersecurity infrastructure, collaborate with technology companies to address vulnerabilities and promote information sharing and cooperation in combating cyber threats.
7. **Engaging in Strategic Communication:** Democracies should proactively engage in strategic communication to counter disinformation and propaganda. This involves effectively communicating accurate information, addressing false narratives, and countering misleading narratives with evidence-based messaging.

Conclusion

The emergence of sharp power as a form of influence in global power dynamics poses significant challenges to democratic systems and the integrity of international relations. The impact of sharp power on global governance includes destabilization, erosion of trust in institutions, and suppression of dissenting voices. Democracies and the international community must respond with comprehensive strategies and countermeasures to mitigate the influence of sharp power. Potential responses to sharp power include strengthening democratic resilience by protecting freedom of expression, promoting media literacy, and enhancing cybersecurity measures. Transparency and accountability should be prioritized to prevent undue influence, and international cooperation is crucial in developing norms and guidelines to address sharp power challenges. Supporting civil society organizations and independent media outlets, strengthening cybersecurity infrastructure, and engaging in strategic communication are essential measures to counter sharp power. By implementing these responses, democratic societies can enhance their ability to withstand attempts at manipulation, protect their democratic institutions, and uphold the principles of democracy. International cooperation and collective action are vital to address the transnational nature of sharp power threats and ensure the preservation of democratic governance and the integrity of international relations in the 21st century.